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## IN TRANSITION

### Bonita House helps reconstruct lives

**Project offers temporarily homeless women job training, counseling, child care, as well as shelter**

By **BETTY L. MARTIN**  
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Standing in her newly constructed living room, the young woman smiled.

"My apartment is a safe, wholesome, decent situation, and this is a place where I can learn to make a decent living," she said, referring to the one-year college program she is enrolled in to learn how to decipher medical codes for billing. "It's an excellent opportunity and I'm grateful."

Like other residents of the 60 apartment units or two 16-bed dormitories of the Bonita House of Hope Transitional Housing Complex, 2605 Parker Road, the woman was — just a few months ago — one of the estimated 10,000 homeless people living on Houston's streets.

The goal at Bonita House is to shelter the temporarily homeless and to muster local resources to provide job training, alcohol and drug counseling, child care and other service programs needed to put the once homeless person on the path to self-sufficiency, said Karen Overbeck, project manager with HomeAid Houston. The chapter is one of 22 that together are the nation's largest provider of shelter beds — including 199 units for two people per unit at Bonita House of Hope.

The apartment complex was constructed in the North Houston area for \$3.6 million with funds provided by HomeAid Houston, a nonprofit organization of the Greater Houston Builders Association.

Construction of the eight-building facility began in June 2004 and the grand opening was May 19.

The city of Houston provided \$1 million for serving HIV-positive women and children.

The city also gave \$1 million through a federal grant with the Department of Housing and Urban Development for Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS, money used to purchase the 4.7-acre site in northeast Houston.

"This was the second largest shelter project in the nation," Overbeck said.



Houston's Bonita House resembles an upscale apartment complex more than a shelter, but according to founder Tyrone Evans, there's still work to be done.

Of those, 32 units are for women in substance abuse treatment; more than 40 for women with children; and 19 for people who are dually diagnosed with substance abuse and mental illnesses or other disorders.

Fourteen units are dedicated to housing opportunities for people with AIDS.

### **Path to self-sufficiency**

As of July 1, Bonita Street has been for men only, while Bonita House is exclusively for women and children.

Michele Criddle, 36, arrived Aug. 10 after a 10-month addiction to crack cocaine and alcohol abuse, a relapse that had followed a 10-year period of being alcohol and drug free.

"My life was out of control. I couldn't find a job and I started to self-medicate ... I overdosed and someone brought me back to life in a hotel room," Criddle said. "I decided to go into a really structured environment."

She came to Bonita House, where she entered the 90-day drug treatment program, where she attends group meetings for alcohol- and drug-addicted women.

She has continued her education and is close to getting a bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology from St. Edwards University's distance-learning program.

"I have education, work experience for the state in management positions, and still ended up in the drug environment," Criddle said. "It can happen to anyone."

The program offers Criddle not only a chance to learn to change her bad habits, but to learn how to fortify her own identity.

"We are sharing and strengthening ourselves, every one of us. We have so much to offer the world," she said. "This program is helping us to do that."

The dining room's equipment serves three meals to about 200 women and children each day, said Tyrone Evans, founder and director of Bonita Street House of Hope's two locations.

Linda Kimble, who graduated from the Bonita Street shelter's programs four years ago and now lives in Huntsville, dropped by Bonita House to see Evans and the other staff members — people she regards as friends who helped her overcome her addiction to heroin and begin life again.

"I was using for 30 years," she said. "Married three times and finally down to a suitcase and a box of clothes. When I came here, I was so sick and tired of being sick and tired."

She stayed there for nine months and was able to get her high school diploma through the University of Houston in 2004.

She was promoted to shift manager at her job, then became manager.

## Developing discipline

The single, most important benefit she got was discipline in a life without structure, she said.

"I had to take suggestions. Little things like a curfew meant a lot in learning everything all over again, about unity, honesty, hope — to be willing and humble enough to ask for help," she said. "I paid cash for a new house. Today I have a car and a truck and I'm OK with Linda now.

"I enjoy life."

The diversity of programs and the new facilities at Bonita House resemble an upscale apartment complex more than a shelter, but there's still a lot of work to be done, Evans said.

"All these wonderful programs are because of donors, corporations, private foundations and a lot of caring people," he said. "But we still need playground equipment for the children's play area, the dining room needs tables and chairs. We need a van and more supplies."

For details on the facilities, see [www.homeaidhouston.org](http://www.homeaidhouston.org), or send e-mail to [bonitahope@sbcglobal.net](mailto:bonitahope@sbcglobal.net).

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